

Shakespeare and the Languages of Performance
Folger Shakespeare Library
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Electronic Workbook
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INTRODUCTION

Lois Potter, University of Delaware

"Shakespeare and the Languages of Performance" was a new departure for the Folger Institute: a course meeting one weekend a month throughout the academic year rather than for an intensive period, like the NEH summer institutes, or one afternoon a week, like the other Folger seminars. The new format was primarily the idea of Lena Orlin, director of academic programs at the Folger. She felt that an Institute with a strongly pedagogical emphasis would work best if spread over a whole academic year, so that members could try out ideas raised in the seminars and report back on the results.

After Lena asked me to direct this course we worked together on its structure, each of us contributing about half the suggestions for speakers and projects. The plan was to balance theory and practice, scholarship and its application in pedagogical terms, sessions with hands-on experience and talk-sessions. Two of the events were to be open to the public: Harry Berger's lectures in November and (with a limit on numbers) Ralph Cohen's visit with the Shenandoah Shakespeare Express in March. We were lucky in that we did not have to modify this plan at all: thanks to Lena's careful advance planning and the prestige of the Folger, everyone we asked was able to come at the time we wanted. Two sessions, apart from the introductory one, were dedicated to the group's own work. At the halfway point, in February, individual members were to present projects about their teaching. In our last session in May, we were to produce something that would be a record of the year's work. My previous experience of directing a seminar at the Folger had convinced me that it helps if a group has a tangible goal at which to aim--in this case, a workbook based on the information and ideas resulting from the seminar. So this too was built into the course from the beginning.

Lena's superb submission won us the NEH funding needed for the project, and, about a year after our initial planning, we sat down, with two other members of the Folger Institute, to select the participants. This was a difficult job: there were nearly 70 applicants (an unprecedentedly large number) for 15 NEH-funded places. We tried to choose people who had a lot to gain as well as to give, with a variety of special interests within English studies and the performing arts. We also took some account of the need for a reasonable balance of geography and gender. But our main concern was with quality. The successful candidates were not only gifted academics or performance specialists (or both), they were also highly rated as teachers and as people who worked well with others. When I finally met them, in September, they turned out to be just as good in person as on paper.

The seminar's basic structure was established in the first session, which focused on reviewing (see p. 00). Most Friday nights were spent at the theater, and the production was reviewed by the group as a whole (in September, November and December) or by a subgroup (in January, February, April and May). The reviews, done overnight, were duplicated and read by everyone on the following morning, leading into a discussion of the production. Although this required a lot of hard work on the part of the reviewers, I felt that it paid off: they could see themselves getting better at observation and recording; as they got more experienced, they also took more risks, and began to connect the theatrical experience with other parts of the weekend. The only occasions on which there was no performance to review--Audrey Stanley's workshop in October and the visit of the Shenandoah Shakespeare Express in March--the entire emphasis of the weekend was theatrical in any case, and Friday night was taken up with rehearsals.

Saturday nights were often left free for people to engage in individual or small group activities, sometimes devoted to a theatre visit or other project:

in October it was a video of Janet Suzman's production of Othello, in March a banquet preceeding the final version of our "redirected" Antony and Cleopatra. I am not sure about the educational (as opposed to entertainment) value of the theatre visits on Saturdays, which were optional and which no one reviewed, especially since we were unable to discuss them except informally in hotel rooms afterwards. However, those who saw The African Company Performs Richard III at the Arena in February were so delighted with its uncanny appropriateness to what we had just been doing that afternoon that the actors must have wondered whether their audience was drunk. Perhaps our most successful Saturday night was the December one when (having seen Hamlet on Friday night) we managed somehow to discuss the draft of a colleague's Hamlet book, to raise pedagogical issues that we hoped to discuss later, and to conduct a reading of the Bad Quarto of Hamlet that, although hilarious, also convinced many of us that it's nothing like as Bad as people usually say.

Another almost fixed element of the seminar arose out of our sense of satisfaction at the physical workouts that Audrey Stanley gave us in the October session. To counteract the effects of so much sitting during weekends that were primarily devoted to discussion, we asked Kate and Mary to lead us in one short warmup each day. These were much more fun than any otgher warmups I have ever known, but they did wonders for us and had a pedagogical effect as well. At least one of the seminar members reports that he now responds to torpid moments in class by making his students get up, stretch, and shake.

Two other ongoing activities were the discussion of teaching and the keeping of records for the Workbook. We got to a fair number of the Pedagogical Problems (as I rather pretentiously called them) in our February session, but they frequently came up as by-products of other discussions, especially those with Michael Goldman in our April session. As for the Workbook, its existence is the result of an energetic and determined committee which kept reminding everyone of the tasks that still needed accomplishing. What you see here is the result of a lot of work by them, and by everyone else in the group; I hope it will he useful for other people as well as a souvenir of a very happy experience.

Lois Potter

The group that made up the Institute on "Shakespeare and the Languages of Performance" was acknowledged by everyone--the Folger staff, the organizers, and the visiting lecturers--to be absolutely splendid. Of course, we will never know whether a different group of 15 might have been equally splendid. The Folger atmosphere works its own magic on people, as does the fact that the superbly organized Institute staff (Lena herself, Carol Brobeck, Kathleen Lynch, and Suzy Fox) give their undivided attention to each session, adding those innumerable thoughtful and imaginative touches that make all the difference. I think especially of the way the Antony and Cleopatra theme appeared in the snacks (fig newtons in a basket with a rubber snake) and the banquet (Caesar salad and an Egyptian queen magnificently iced onto the cake), also of the birthday cake they provided at the tea break in the session after that. This combination of intellectual rapport and sheer fun is exactly what, in my view, the course was about.

SECTION II: REVIEWING

The Art of Reviewing
Lois Potter

At the International Shakespeare conference at Stratford-upon-Avon, England, it used to be possible to gather after the evening's performance and talk with other participants over coffee and orange juice. On one of these occasions, having just seen Hamlet, several of us approached a distinguished academic authority on the play. "Well, what did you think?" He quoted a line that he believed the actor had said wrongly: "To be or not to be, that *is* the question", shook his head grimly, and added, "I left in the interval [intermission]." This is perhaps an extreme case of academic blinkeredness but it helps to explain why I decided to focus the Folger seminar on reviewing.

Assessing a Shakespeare production is an immensely difficult activity. The spectator is trying to process an enormous amount of experience: the event exists in the present as a vast, competing set of signs, and also in the past, as one's previous idea of the play, perhaps supported by recollections of critical views and other productions. It's not surprising that, as Lyn Tribble says elsewhere, inexperienced reviewers, not knowing where to start, seize on the one thing they remember disliking--often, a technical hitch or a garbled bit of speech--and then use that as the basis for everything else they say. Even experienced theatregoers and scholars of Shakespeare may realize, when they come to think of it, that they don't really know what they are looking for in a production. Often, moreover, they themselves have an uneasy sense that their final verdict does not really correspond to their experience as audience.

In the first weekend of the seminar, I tried to make the group more aware of what we do at the theater, partly by breaking down the experience into a number of components. In order to show how different kinds of people *saw* a play. I distributed a lot of advance material about reviewing: examples of reviews from the eighteenth century to the present, reviews of other productions of the play we were to see on Friday night (*Troilus and Cressida*), and the *Shakespeare Quarterly* issue that dealt with the purpose and value of theatre reviews. After the group assembled on Friday, we began by hearing, then seeing, a scene from a video of *Othello* (the Trevor Nunn production). That is, we played it the first time without looking at the screen, and then compared our reactions when we were able to see what was happening. I'm not sure how perfect this was as an experiment, since the bustling realism of the Nunn production means that it is actually rather hard to hear a lot of it. One of the BBC versions would probably have been a better choice for this kind of experiment, but I chose this one because at that stage it was still not available in the US and I wanted the group to be confronted with something that would be unfamiliar to all of them.)

Video, of course, can allow us to experience only two of the three senses which (we later learned from Jean-Marie Maguin) are reached by theatrical performance. (The third is smell, but we never got into an exploration of this element, which may be just as well.) It also doesn't confront what for me is one of the main problems of live theatre--the fact that, unlike video, it does not direct one's eye exactly where to look. This is obviously one of the main reasons why no two people see exactly the same thing when they go to the theatre. By way of encouraging a more careful look at the evening's performance, I gave out the famous Patrice Pavis questionnaire (or rather, an adaptation of it, phrased in simpler terms; I won't quote it here, as Lyn's article gives her version of it). This questionnaire asks a series of largely factual questions about such things as set, lighting, costumes, sound, etc., and then goes on to try to pin down more impressionistic responses, with, for instance, the question, "How would you represent the production in a photograph of a particular moment?" I added questions for the benefit of those who already knew the play: how did the audience reaction surprise them? what in the production differed from their expectations? The group improved the questionnaire by the addition of a number of useful questions; for instance,

one about the implications of the casting turned out to be particularly important for that evening's *Troilus and Cressida*, in which the director had obviously wanted to make a point by using African-American actors in the roles of Achilles, Patroclus and Ajax. After the first day's activities, we went together to the theatre, and everyone was asked to produce an overnight review, to be duplicated and circulated for general discussion the following morning.

On Saturday morning, while we waited for the reviews to be xeroxed, we analyzed the programs of three previous productions of the play, plus the program that we had all received the previous night. The semiotics of program design turned out to be a remarkably rich field of study, and I was amazed at the sophistication of some of the analyses that resulted. As it would have taken too long to read seventeen reviews, we then broke into small groups which read and discussed each others, reporting back to the main group afterwards. The result was a very thorough discussion of the production in the light of the work we had done.

This was essentially the way we dealt with reviews in the period before Christmas, in order to ensure that everyone's work got looked at. Another advantage of the approach, as with all the small-group work, was that it ensured the quieter people a chance to talk--something for which they had to fight in the exuberant atmosphere of the large-group discussions. After Christmas, to make life slightly less exhausting for everyone, I delegated a small number to do each review, and it was then possible for the entire group to discuss all four or five pieces the next morning. I found that the collective theatre visit and review provided a useful focus for our weekend, and was glad to see that reviewers soon began to relate the seminar discussion to the experience of playgoing. Harry Berger's lectures on self-presentation in drama led perfectly into the Arena Stage production of *The Way of the World*, where eyes were painted on the stage floor and characters were constantly shown observing one another; Two members of the seminar did a delightful joint review of *Edward II* in the style of some of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century theatre critics they had read for our stage history session, while another one attempted to take pure description as far as it could go in his analysis of the measurements of the set. A particularly gratifying result of the reviewing project was that our December guest lecturer, Jean-Marie Maguin, offered to publish our multiple accounts of the Shakespeare Theatre's *Hamlet* in *Cahiers Elisabethains*, the journal he edits from the University of Montpellier. Ann Cook heroically undertook to synthesize our eighteen contributions, adding further research into the theatre promptbook and acquiring production photographs. The result, drafted by her and collaboratively edited before she produced the final version, is in itself a stunning justification of the seminar.

Lyn Tribble's essay on reviewing will show one way of using this device as a teaching tool. I am convinced that writing a really good analysis of a production will show undergraduate students more about a play than most of them can get from simply looking at the page; I also totally agree with her that such an analysis can be achieved only by careful preparation.

Student Reviews of Plays

Evelyn Tribble, Temple University

This section raises a prior question, which is how you get your students to a play. My experience is based on five years teaching at Temple University, a large urban campus. The student body is working class; most of them commute rather than live on campus. So on the one hand, I'm fortunate because I teach

in an area that can usually be counted on to have a Shakespearean production of some sort once a year; on the other, it can be very difficult to orchestrate the schedules of thirty-five students.

I've had the most luck when I have made it difficult for them *not* to go. Here, three things are key: 1) announce the date(s) on the syllabus; 2) get money early; 3) make them review the production. Unless I'm teaching at night, when we can simply go after class, I find it necessary to reserve seats on two different nights. Students who can't make one of the groups must make arrangements on their own.

My students are usually not very knowledgeable about classic theatre; they're likely to have seen *Cats* or *Les Miserables*, but that's about all. Thus it's very important to give them clear guidelines for watching and reviewing a performance. When I first began to take students to plays, I simply told them to write a review like a newspaper review. The results were pretty depressing. Students tended to be extremely critical, though seldom on clear or defensible grounds. If they weren't critical, they had virtually nothing to say.

The solution I've arrived at through this workshop has been to stress description. I use the following modified Pavis questionnaire:

Shakespeare: Performance Questionnaire
(modified version of "Pavis Questionnaire")

(Note: this list covers three separate, yet overlapping procedures: *description*, *interpretation*, and *critique*.)

1. What were the stage space and audience space like?
2. What was immediately striking about the "look" of the production?
3. Was there a set? What was it like? If changed, how was this done?
4. What kinds of sound were you aware of (include clarity, silences, non-vocal noise)
5. Did you notice anything about the lighting?
6. Were there any costumes that stood out as especially significant? What was their shape, style, color? their relationship to actors' bodies? Can you characterize the period conveyed?
7. How would you describe the pace of the production? If there was an intermission, describe any differences between the parts (e.g. did the pace move more quickly after the intermission?)
8. What moments gave you particular pleasure or unease?
9. In what ways, if any, did the director's interpretation differ from what you had expected? Which elements of the production did s/he most emphatically employ to convey that interpretation?
10. Did the audience reaction ever surprise you? How so?
11. How would you describe the use of space, including blocking and movement?
12. Comment on casting, including gender, race, age, body types, and agility.
13. Consider how the program influences the audience. How does it present the

production?

On the class day before the performance, we go over each category; I try to explain them by using examples from films or from scene work we've done in class. We also discuss the distinctions among description, interpretation, and critique. Then I give the the following assignment:

As soon as possible after seeing the performance, note your responses to each of these questions. On [date], you should bring in a typed review that touches on the relevant categories above. Bring enough copies for everyone in the class; you may single-space in order to save money on photocopying. The point of this exercise is not simply to say "thumbs up" or "thumbs down." You must show in the review that you have watched the performance carefully and have thought about how the various elements of the theatrical experience (outlined above) were employed. What do you think the director and cast were trying to accomplish? Did they succeed or fail? As in the other papers, you must back up your claims with evidence; in this case, you will be using the sensory "evidence" you culled from attentively watching the play. Don't just jump into critique; instead, begin by using selective description in order to convey the look and feel of the production.

[Note: when I do this again, I plan to emphasize that they should not *just* describe; merely answering each question does not a good review make. Note also that students will probably ask you whether they should take notes. I told them that I find notes to be more of a hindrance than a help, but that they should do as they wish, as long as they don't annoy people around them. I also suggested that they sketch the stage space.]

On the whole, I found these reviews vastly better than those I'd received under my old (so-called) system. The students *saw* a great deal more than they might have otherwise; they were forced to approach the play, at least initially, on its own terms; and they had a great deal of specific material from which to make convincing critiques.

I also found that discussion of the play is greatly enhanced when the reviews are used as a tool. If the class is small, everyone can read each other's review; if large, small groups can be formed to report back to the class as a whole. The discussion is likely to be both lively and informed.

Finally, I reproduce here a couple of reviews written by my students. (The students are usually sophomores or juniors taking the class as a breadth requirement; they are not English majors).

REVIEW #1

With gleeful guitar and mandolin music in the background, the colorfully-dressed cast of the Philadelphia Area Repertory Theatre explores the many questions of love in its performance of Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* at the cozy Mask & Wig Theatre.

The humor of love is addressed in a rip-roaring scene where uptight Malvolio reads a mischievously-placed letter falsely revealing Countess Olivia's secret love for him.

The frustration of love is seen in the eyes of Olivia, Duke Orsino, and the lady Viola when they are initially unable to sway the eyes of those whom they love.

The fleeting nature of love is expressed throughout the performance as the players seem to have love hit them with the sudden sting of Cupid's arrow.

And the ultimate joy of love is discovered in the final scene when the characters find each other through their disguises and share their love in a somewhat pedestrian but nevertheless well-received and appropriate happy ending.

The most striking feature of the production is the mastery of director Gregory Doran, a director with the Royal Shakespeare Company, in turning the mouse-sized stage space into an advantage. In an area no bigger than 20'x15', the players are able to move about without restricting each other and are in fact better able to perform numerous pratfalls that are essential to the comedic impact of the play.

The previously-mentioned scene where a falsely-penned letter tricks Malvolio involves four active cast members on the stage, and their crashing, stumbling, and general histrionics are facilitated by their physical proximity to each other. Doran's mastery is also revealed in his use of the aisle in the audience for a stage entrance and an exit runway to the side that expands the stage area for the players. All of the space available is used, and more.

The only point when the stage space becomes a disadvantage is in the closing scene when the entire ensemble is shocked by the double vision of Viola and her twin brother Sebastian on the stage at the same time. They are in the room together, but don't see each other because Viola is brooding in a corner. The time it takes for the twins to see each other seems rather unrealistic in the restricted space.

One thing the small stage space requires is a simple set, and this set is very simple. There are a few plants and a four-foot high stand set around the appropriately-suited loveseat that the characters sit on, stand on, and hurdle over at various times. The simplicity of the set and the lack of a significant set change also focuses the attention of the audience on the characters.

And the characters demand attention. They demand it with their looks, they demand it with their costumes, and they demand it with their actions.

The cast is generally very young, as love is often best expressed in the star-crossed eyes of youth. Louis Langford's Viola is sufficiently bright-eyed to play a young boy, but she is honestly a bit too attractive for the role. For the cast to believe all along that she is a boy is not beyond reason, but it calls for the audience to make a stretch.

The cast is more than nimble enough to perform the lumping and crashing that gives the performance its biggest laughs. Leading this hit parade is Sir Andrew Aguecheek, whose leg-kicking opening appearance draws the biggest audience applause for an individual.

The colorful costumes match the characters' active nature and the gleeful music of the performance. The bold reds and golds of the players' costumes are that much more enlivening when they go flying across the stage on a jumping and singing individual. The singing is generally left to Feste, Olivia's jester.

Feste wears loose-fitting garb, which allows for his smooth movement about the stage. Sir Andrew Aguecheek, on the other hand, sports a tight-fitting costume, which facilitates the herky-jerky spills he often takes.

The costumes are appropriate and only seem misdirected in the all-black garb Olivia wears at the play's outset, but the black clashes with the love she

finds for Viola early on. And while the white wedding dress she wears in the second half of the performance makes perfect sense, limiting Olivia to those two colors is a bit extreme.

Lending a hand to the cast and their costumes in demanding attention is the fast pace that Doran establishes for the production early on. Entrances for individual scenes are made just as the players from the previous scenes are exiting the expanded stage. So the action is continuous and the stage is never empty, yet the audience is able to follow the players and the plot without confusion.

The fast pace is assisted by the equally-active lighting, which shines brightly and then dims to separate scenes for the opening act when there was no time lag between scenes involving music-filled room and Viola sadly explaining the loss of her twin brother on a darkened set.

The pace of the performance does slow down a bit after the intermission, as the humor of love gives way to its ultimate and finalizing joy. The scenes are longer and there is generally less accomplished by the characters as the play moves along. While in the beginning Viola is sent back and forth from Duke Orsino to Olivia, the closing of the play takes place with everybody in one place.

In terms of individual performances, Eric Giancoli is sufficiently regal in his portrayal of Duke Orsino. Lenny Elliot and Jim Ireland do well as the active Feste and Sir Andrew Aguecheek, respectively. And H. Michael Walls is the most solid performer as Sir Toby Belch, Olivia's uncle and a drunk. The remainder of the cast is good, but not great.

Taken together, the play does a more or less outstanding job of exploring the many faces of love. Such an excursion is introduced in the play's program, which guides the audience to look past the humor of the play into the underlying issue of what love is.

While there is no definitive answer to this question at the end of the performance, there is a sufficiently well-crafted approach to answering it. The director begins this exploration, and leaves it to be answered individually by each member of the audience.

REVIEW #2

The Philadelphia Area Repertory Theatre's production of *Twelfth Night* is fairly effective in its efforts to bring one of Shakespeare's finest comedies to life. From the casting to the costumes, it was a very entertaining production which keeps the audience laughing. I was interested to see what a small company could do with such a small theatre. By using a simple set with a few moveable props, ethnic costumes, and original music, the director attempts to portray the city Illyria and the houses of Orsino and Olivia. I believe that he is mostly successful in this effort but the some flaws.

The casting for the most part is excellent: almost every actor is convincing both in physical stature and character. The only exception is Lady Olivia who is at times too melodramatic and also seems much older than I expected. Orsino is an attractive and distinguished looking man. Viola and Sebastian really look like sister and brother, but I am not sure I ever thought Viola looked like a man. Sir Toby, an old drunk complete with a potbelly, and his sidekick Sir Andrew, played as a cowardly wimp, provide the funniest moments of the production, especially in the scene where Malvolio finds "Olivia's" loveletter.

In consideration of these and the other characters, I would say casting is a definite strong point in this production.

The costumes appear to be "traditional" Illyrian garb: white shirts, colorful pants, belts, and hats. A couple of variations on this theme help to define characters, such as Sir Toby's beer mug which is attached to his costume. Lady Olivia's costume are the only ones which do not fit in with this motif. They look like they are from a different time and place, more like seventeenth-century England than Illyria.

I am also disappointed with the music which is both live and recorded. *Twelfth Night* contains some of the most frequently set song texts in all of music. My expectations, although maybe a little too high, were left completely unfulfilled. Not only is the music of this production boring but it does nothing to enhance the mood of the play. In fact, I thought it weakened several moments, such as the wedding scene and also the finale.

In contrast to the disappointing music, the set design is interesting yet practical. The set has a backdrop painted with the skyline of the city. Two archways adorn either side of the stage. The actors can easily step from any one of the three levels because they are only a few feet apart. The director makes pretty good use of the space, including an entrance from the back of the house by Sebastian and Antonio. However, despite the use of movable props like Olivia's kneeler, an umbrella, and some trees, I had to use my imagination to believe the scene shifts from Orsino's house to Olivia's. Perhaps some variations in lighting would help--they use only two gradations, bright for day and dark for night--or even a slight pause between scenes.

All in all the play moves along very quickly, especially after the intermission. There is never a serious moment and never a dull one. Despite its few flaws I thought it was a very enjoyable production.